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AFRO-PESSIMISM AS AESTHETIC BLACKNESS? [PUTTING THE PESSIMISM IN AFRO-PESSIMISM]

PHILOFICTION BLACKNESS, NON-FUTURE, NON-LARUELLE, QUEER

On the occasion of Achille Mbembe's new preface to the African reprint of On the Postcolony by Wits University Press.

Mbembe: Critique is witnessing as well as endless vigilance, interrogation and anticipation. A proper critique requires us first to dwell in the chaos of the night in order precisely to better break through into the dazzling light of the day.

This paper is on the darkness that clings to so-called "afro-pessimism." My thesis is that to take the "pessimism" of afro-pessimism seriously, I argue for moving from the metaphysical pessimism of making claims about this world to the moral pessimism of a fatalistic attitude towards the world.

I make my argument in three parts. First, I draw out the negativity of blackness introduced by the Black Radical Tradition. I begin with the Tradition's transformative project to overcome the negation of blackness. Establishing the area of controversy, I provide an account of how afro-pessimism parts ways through the concept of social death. Second, I reconstruct the argument through Frantz Fanon's "fact of blackness" straddling nothingness and infinity. On the one hand, afro-pessimism is indebted to Fanon's psychoanalytic statement on the ontology of blackness. Frank Wilderson provides the most definitive account to date. The crux of his work is a tripartite re-working of Lacanian subject categories through formulation of red, white, & black as the constitutive racial antagonisms of the United States (*Red, White, & Black*, 2010). While on the other, there is Fred Moten's black optimism that challenges (through Chandler) the role of ontological foundationalism necessary in such clear analytic categories ("Blackness and Nothingness"). Third, I investigate alternatives to the ontological founding of blackness's negativity. I here draw on theories of gender (Warren's *Onticide*, Spillers, Edelman), and philosophies of negation (Sexton, Thacker, Laruelle). I want to consider what is at stake for founding negation on the strategic orientation of pessimism, and at what cost.

The Black Radical Tradition

To understand blackness, one can begin with the context set by The Black Radical Tradition. Scholars have argued that enslaved African peoples have transferred and edited "historical, cultural, and moral materials" as an ongoing shared resource (Interview). Cedric Robinson argues in *Black Marxism* for the self-conscious development of those materials into a political project that he calls "The Black Radical Tradition." Familiar Marxists fill the ranks of the Tradition, namely WEB DuBois, CLR James, and (more

recently) Angela Davis. Generalizing the problematic out from individual thinkers, we can think the Lukacsian spirit of the challenge posed by the project of The Black Radical Tradition: how can blackness overcome the self-aware fact of shared condition to become a self-aware political force? Or in the elegant Marxian terms: the transition from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself (commonly derived from *The Poverty of Philosophy*).

The print-based work of Black Panther Party Minister of Culture Emory Douglas is an exemplar of black consciousness raising. In a May 2, 1970 poster for The Black Panther, Douglas depicts two militants in the heavy line-work of his classic bold style. The figures are themselves a demonstration, as in a textbook illustration. Both are armed. The man on the left is anxiously awaiting some impending threat, while the woman on the right gives a cold stare as if she sees right through the viewer. Pinned to either's collar is a button; one says "All Power to the People" and the other "Free All Political Prisoners." Above their heads, he places a quote from Party Chairman Huey Newton, letting the strength of the words dominate the image through narrative. "Black people can destroy the machinery that's enslaving them" it begins, "American cannot stand to fight every black country in the world and fight a civil war at the same time," ending with "It is militarily impossible to do both of these things at once." The poster offers itself as visual proof of the transformation of object to subject of history.

George Jackson outlines the psychological project of the Black Panther Party as involving three inter-related tasks: establishment of an underground press with an emphasis on 'mass style,' popularization of revolutionary culture, direction by an 'ultra-aggressive' political party (Blood in My Eye, 43). As such, Douglas's prints bring the Party to life. His art poses Blacks as strong, militant, and active figures that are too large to be contained by the page. Set off against vibrant backgrounds, he emblazons his subjects with easy-to-read slogans and narratives, which dispels any ambiguity about their purpose.

Afro-pessimism offers a stark assessment of the Black Radicalism's project of coming into being through such transcendence. Persuasively, both approaches begin with a similar approach to alienation – because even if reality is not dialectical, at the very least, colonialism was. The colonial gaze simultaneously cast blackness as infinitely Other but precisely objectified.

After silently acknowledging their agreement, the two approaches part ways. On the one hand, the Tradition searches for itself by dialectically negating colonial negation. Black Radicalism plumbs this shared subjection to find the conditions for transforming object into subject recognized by history. And history has spoken back through the self-affirmation of *négritude's* poets, the forceful propaganda of Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the many global tongues of political hip-hop.

As for Afro-pessimism? Jared Sexton convincingly argues that both positions agree that there in the ongoing attempt to reduce black social life to black social death – in that "black life is lived in social death" (*Ante-Anti-Blackness*). The disagreement revolves over a question of strategy. Against black optimism's attempt to "negate black social death by vitalizing it," afro-pessimism puts "double emphasis, on lived and on death" (*Ante-Anti-Blackness*). Such a doubling-down does not extend black life as an addition to the multicultural rainbow but offers access to social death's terrifying economy of violence (Sexton; Patterson).

Hank Willis Thomas's 2013 sculpture "Raise Up" is a striking embodiment of black social death. Ten brass figures reach out of a white pedestal, facing the wall with their hands held up. While each differing slightly, all ten are presumably men. Why are their faces obscured? Perhaps it is a lineup (but none of the hands are flat against the wall). They could be at a prayer service (though that is not reason enough to face them away from us). After the Michael Brown shooting of 2014, it would certainly be easy to imagine it paying homage to the activist "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!"

We can only see one's set of shoulders. The rest are submerged so deeply in the white base that torsos, necks, mouths are sliced off. Some sort of inhumanity has occurred – these are incomplete people; not only have we been cut off from them, but they are have been separated from themselves. In spite of everything, the figures are still somehow active. It is not as if the heads and arms have been carelessly strewn about or arranged in a stilted attempt to unnaturally pose them.

Those familiar with South African Apartheid may not have to guess at all. Thomas based the sculptural work on a famous photograph by Ernest Cole of nude black miners undergoing a medical examination.

But even more than a strategic orientation for Black Studies, it is a pessimistic transvaluation of values. "In Western cultures," Eugene Thacker argues, "it is commonly accepted that one celebrates birth and mourns death" ("Cosmic Pessimism," 74). "Wouldn't it make more sense to mourn birth and celebrate death?," he proposes. The strange consequence would be that "mourning and living would be the same thing." Afro-pessimism is thus apocalyptic. It takes seriously Fanon's urging to bring about "the end of the world," which he says is the "only thing... worth the effort of starting" (BSWM, 96).

Fanon: Straddling Infinity and Nothingness

Outlining the source of negativity for various theorists may clarify the dispute between black optimism and afro-pessimism. To do so, I begin with Frantz Fanon's "fact of blackness," which I trace through optimist Fred Moten and pessimist Frank Wilderson.

Frantz Fanon's negativity is the result of the "fact of blackness." Featured in the fifth chapter of his psychoanalytic studies *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon theorizes blackness as a process of mis-recognition. It is on the street where one discovers their blackness, he says. "Look, a Negro!," someone calls out, and he is "battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships." Suspending the step of the dialectic, blackness is sealed into "crushing objecthood" (109, 112).

Fanon thus argues in *Wretched of the Earth* that the struggle for decolonization marks the insufficiency of thought and the necessity of violence. We can call this Fanon's becoming-wretched. Taking its leave from humanity, blackness is left of responsibility, left "straddling Nothingness and Infinity" (BSWM 140). Each represents a path: one follows the deepest underground current, the other banished to the underworld of the damned.

Fred Moten explores the infinity of blackness. Fact does not halt blackness for him (as it does for Fanon). Moten affirms blackness as aporia – a necessary impossibility that works analogously to late Derrida's work on hospitality. Black life to him emerges from an "irreducible and impossible sociality" ("Case of Blackness," 188). But against Derrida, he follows Fanon's insistence that the infinity of blackness is not found through the other. Moten chooses instead to mirror Agamben's figures of the threshold (Bartleby, Kafka's Man Before the Law); figures that tragically find their power in the indiscernible gap between capacity and incapacity.

Looking within black life itself, Moten focuses on the gap between "the fact of blackness and the lived experience of the black" (180). What the gap reveals to Moten is a fundamental ungovernability – a dangerous constitutive supplement that makes whiteness what it is (180, 187). Where Agamben places tragedy, Moten identifies a concealed motor of negativity. The force that propels it comes from "an anoriginal displacement of ontology" ("Blackness and Nothingness," 739; 754-5). This is the kernel of black vitalism. Moten's blackness is a movement that cannot but exceed the finitude of social death. As force of the outside, this blackness is fugitive.

Photographer Devin Allen captured the iconic scene from the recent rebellion in Baltimore. Bearing the word "TIME," the magazine's name solicits a historical reading. Extending this invitation, the issue makes the cyclical statement that famous year of global rebellion is under erasure but still returns, "America, 1968 2015." The title of the article further elaborates with the title "What has Changed. What Hasn't."

The image supplies its own answer for 'what has changed' and 'what hasn't.' The portion of the image that is in focus is its background. A street quickly cuts across the foreground set off from a raised highway and an old industrial building. Above hangs two white surveillance cameras. Behind streams many rows of riot police; their faces are concealed by large helmets, leaving only their outstretched hands as evidence of their humanity. But in those hands, the police carry large batons for violently striking protestors. Clearly, this is what remains the same.

Bearing the blurriness of movement, a young Black man is turning the corner to dart out of view. His figure lacks definition even though he is the ostensible focus of the shot. As if already disappearing, his face is masked by a bandana, and he peers decisively far beyond what we see.

Frank Wilderson asserts the force of nothingness. He agrees with Fanon that when blackness tries to "express existence" through self-consciousness, it only ends up "finding only the nonexistent" (BSWM, 137). Wilderson flips Fanon's non-ontology, which poses blackness as "a flaw that outlaws ontological explanation," for the outlaw ontology of the non-. He does this by exchanging Sartre for Lacan. As an effect, Wilderson is not concentered with the construction of a transcendental ego, but a structural system built on the "after-life of slavery" (Patterson).

Wilderson grounds his theorization in the play of movement and color of film to find the "structure of U.S. antagonisms" as told through cinema. For him, the ontology of blackness is fungibility (Hartman) & accumulation (Wilderson), which is to say, not alienation and exploitation. No longer a subject of desire, the fungible object becomes a projective space as a "site of irresistible sensuality" (Spillers). Reduced to property, blackness is not a commodity produced by a subject but itself an object for accumulation. For Wilderson, blackness is in the "structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions" (58). The Marxist ontology of alienation and exploitation implies the potential of species-being and collective exploitation. Wilderson asserts the far more pessimistic homicidal fatality of blackness. For him, black positionality embodies a catastrophic force "that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society" ("Prison Slave," 18).

Otabenga Jones & Associates 2004 sculpture "We Did It For Love" displays the structural power of black positionality. The piece is a tipped over '70s-era black and white police cruiser. The car is not seriously damaged. But lying prone, it is upside-down – exposing its now-useless mechanical system to the observer. The sculpture shows just how easy it is to take a symbol of power and physically inverted it to become a sign of weakness.

There are further signs of distress. The car is empty, and the driver's side door is slightly ajar. Spilling out are the sounds from the radio. Playing is a broadcast of the 1965 Watts Riots amidst a sound collage. Unlike famous civil rights marches, the riots were a spontaneous demonstration born out of frustration that spoke outside the grammar of civil society. While other Otabenga Jones & Associates work draws from the repertoire of black history and waves of radicalism, blackness only appears in this sculpture through its effects. The incapacity of the police stands in for blackness in relief.

In summary: all three accounts of negativity share the common source of Fanon's becoming-wretched, which straddles infinity and nothingness. Moten's black vitalism affirms the infinite movement of blackness, while for Wilderson the homicidal fatality of blackness embodies its destructive force.

... Pessimism

I contend that afro-pessimism has not taken pessimism seriously enough. In what many consider the foundational text, Frank

Wilderson's 2010 book *Red, White, and Black*, pessimism is only mentioned six times. While it is clear that his pessimism emerges from a metaphysical pessimism based on an objective claim about the world (Thacker, 67). I want to push the conversation forward not through the ontology of the non- but a non-ontology. Rather than developing negativity out from structural positionality, I want to develop the other "major key" of pessimism: the subjective attitude of pessimism towards the world (67). I do so by drawing on theories of gender, and philosophies of negation.

Theories of gender offer insight into pessimism. Afro-pessimism takes Hortense Spillers's definition of 'flesh' as a starting point for its analysis of blackness. For Spillers, chattel slavery initiated a literal and figurative theft of the body (206). Bodies exist as the sole possession of the individuals who inhabit them, but when the bodies are mere annexes to the territory of another, the body is reduced to mere flesh. Flesh remains unprotected and lacks a legitimized force to call its own (207). In many ways, the black body remains captive as flesh through the array of disciplinary confinements of the modern prison, exclusionary housing practices, etc. Yet the point is that black bodies remain exposed even as individuals have won the right to their own bodies. Through a pornographic display of culture and politics black pain is written in a "hieroglyphics" that cannot express its own suffering (207). Spillers searches for representational potentialities in this terrible paradox. The one she proposes is "claiming the monstrosity" of racial caricatures (229).

Kara Walker's 2014 installation "A Subtlety" caused uproar. The site for the piece was Brooklyn's old Domino Sugar factory, in which she places an enormous sugar sphinx with exaggerated black characteristics. The sculpture harkens back to a monument approved by the U.S. Senate in 1923 "in memory of the faithful slave mammies of the South" ("Mammy Washington Almost Had"). In its monumental language, Walker's sphinx gives the character an afterlife through figural reproduction. Lying on all fours, the woman carries the dignified posture of the royal sphinx while baring its sexuality through large exposed breasts, a round bare behind, and 10-foot tall vagina.

Controversy erupted over spectators taking selfies in front of the sculpture. Many spectators posed as if pleasuring themselves with the sphinx's many sexualized parts. Others played coy, as if subtly drawing attention to an unusually forward depiction of sexuality. A few people of color attempted to reclaim the statue through gestures of empowerment, though they were easily dwarfed by the gigantic cartoonishness of the sculpture. Some critics feigned disgust, but Walker certainly knew what she was doing. The art object was not the sculpture, but an installation. The audience was perhaps the real subject of Walker's art, which was made obvious by the signs posted around the space, which read: "Please... do not touch the artwork but do share pictures through social media with #karawalkerdomino".

As far as psychoanalysis is used to underwrite blackness, blackness functions as an analog to the libido. Wilderson in particular focuses on Lacan's process of "full speech" in a chapter entitled "The Narcissistic Slave." He does so to establish two key findings: first, that violence against the black body is the constitutive act of social life, and second, that civil society fundamentally bars black speech. There is a deeper mechanism at work that Wilderson does not acknowledge. In establishing that the constitutive act of civil society is the process of excluding blackness to ward off social death, he indirectly implicates blackness in the libidinal functions of the death drive (90).

An easy analogy to Wilderson's deathly blackness is Lee Edelman's theorization of queer negativity. Making the comparison unmistakable, Edelman similarly argues that queerness is to blame for the "undoing of civil society" (*No Future*, 17). Clarifying the status of queerness, he argues that it is not possessed by self-professed "queers" as an identity but embodied in acts of "figural association" (17). This is not to say that people are not objectified in their queerness; Calvin Warren convincingly theorizes the "over-kill" used to spectacularly brutalize queer black bodies. But there is more to the comparison than structural positions. For Edelman, queerness is not a capacity that can be wielded by individuals but the excessive force of the outside. One of his chosen examples are the titular birds from Hitchcock's film, which ferociously arrive unexpectedly to frustrate attempts to consummate the marital scene – at one time, they are so terrifying they cause the city to go up in flames (118). The birds demonstrate how the death drive is embodied neither by "becoming the drive" (as do bugchasers) or taking on an oppositional political identity (as do queer activists), but rather by opposing politics itself (17-18). What separates Edelman from quietism is the relentless rhythm of queerness as death drive, which continues regardless of one's involvement in politics (140). The curious consequence of continuing the comparison is that Wilderson's own formulation of blackness suddenly appears similar to Moten's vitalism, as both hypostatize blackness.

Much of conceptual artist Glenn Ligon's text art explores about how blackness breaks down language. The content of his speech is fairly routine. He does not rely on a single type of address. In his colored work, Ligon reproduces text based on racial fantasies: a joke about black male sexual organs, black nationalist speeches, exaggerated black vernacular. The words he uses in his black and white pieces, when legible, is directly personal and often simpler; he speaks in the confessional first person "I do not..." or "I lost my voice / I found my voice / I lost my voice..."

Ligon uses the materiality of his medium to cut against usual typographic functions. Whereas type helps reproduce speech through a set of condensed easy-to-read characters, Ligon's text pushes past the point of breakdown. The top's uniform lettering, somewhat sloppy though still appearing as if taken straight from a press, sinks into opacity. Words collapse into islands of blackness. What caused the suffocation? Some great burden. A mismatch between materials and their capacities. Perhaps an over-application of ink. Too heavy of a hand.

Philosophies of negation may help clarify the pessimism of afro-pessimism. Jared Sexton routinely insists on the optimism of afro-pessimism. He concludes in important essay with the line that echoes Moten's own optimism through inversion. Sexton declares that "afro- pessimism is 'not but nothing other than' black optimism" ("Ante-Anti-Blackness"). His struggling is to determine if the contrasting position are in fact "in the midst of an argument that is also a profound agreement" ("Ante-Anti-Blackness"). Sexton formulates the agreement in spatial terms whereby "black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space" ("Ante-Anti-Blackness"). Perhaps the disagreement is easily located: optimism searches within the murky depths whereas pessimism channels the alien force of the outside.

Geography is essential to mixed-media artist Abigail Deville's installation Negation: Dusk to Dark. Everything is assembled together and contained within the space of a single room. The cramped space is the site of both an archeology and a futurology. On the ground lies debris of mostly rocks but also some human-made objects. The items are strewn in a disorganized pile and some are obviously castaways bearing traces from their former lives. Hanging above are a series of black trash bags. Together, they make up a collapsed dome with ragged edges falling far into the room. Light penetrates through what could be the veil of the stars. Between the abandoned wreckage and the fallen heavens is a traditionally hung art object. A long white canvas peaks out from a mess of American flags covered in white paint and plaster. Above the piece hangs a light to illuminate it in red light. The resulting light is a battle between the refracting reds and the intermittent brightness let in through the broken sky.

French thinker François Laruelle offers a compelling counter-point. Against the philosophical promise of the decisive judgment and the psychoanalytic assertion of the power of the unconscious, he suggests the non-belief in negativity. Such negativity is not the dialectical overcoming of anti-blackness (double negation) or a structural relation to a potential product (*object petit a*). Laruelle's negation is the pessimistic totality of insufficiency.

In his work "On the Black Universe in the Foundation of Human Color," Laruelle challenges us to "learn to think from the point of view of Black as what determines color in the last instance rather than what limits it" – he calls this task *uchromia* (5). This proposal follows from his argument that every color has a "posture" (5). And the posture of blackness is concealed in its determination of the rest of the universe (a "black box") (6). Cryptically, the black universe is beyond ontology. Such blackness is not the absence of whiteness, the negation of color, or the opposite of light. Blackness has its own presence. Yet the presence of the black universe is not tied to the operations of positivity, double negation, or the unconscious. It is the absolute foreclosure of being. It is the reality of nothing. Explained in more conventional terms, it is an aesthetics without representation. Artistic guidelines might include: lacking a referent, refusing to prick consciousness through meaning or understanding, avoid appealing to seemingly outlaw traditions.

Alexander R. Galloway blazes the path for this new form of thought. For him, *uchromia* offers "a new color utopia rooted in the generic black universe" (149). His suggestion is not an abstract form of colorblindness. Instead, Galloway suggests following the revolutionary actions of the Haitian Constitution of 1804, which declared that all citizens black regardless of color. The point is not white race-denial but a withdrawal from the world of light and color. Its intended effect is a "cataclysm of human color" through the "blanket totality of black" that "renders color invalid" (149). In fewer words: it promises indistinction. It is certainly radical to suggest an alternative to the cultural politics of difference. But perhaps it is time to consider new utopias.

Nathaniel Donnett's "Origin of the World by Funkadelic" plays against cosmic fascination with the origins of the universe. The Big Bang is usually depicted in brilliantly colored computer animation that is accompanied by majestic orchestra music, the voice of a supremely dignified narrator, and awe-inspiring words used to enrapture the audience. "Origin" depicts the cosmos in monotone. Dark dust trails out of a tipped-over black paper bag. The bag is everyday, indicating its upending to be inadvertent and insignificant, except for the star stuff left behind.

Yet the piece gestures beyond cosmic wonder through its named attribution to Funkadelic. The reference silently taps into the cosmology of afro-futurism. It could be recalling funk as a "cosmic slop" to be unearthed, though the song by that name is ostensibly about a woman who prostitutes herself for the sake of her children's future. If so, it may benefit from the ambivalence of Sun Ra's cosmic pessimism, in this world is pitted against the world to be destroyed.

Conclusion

The Black Radical Tradition set early terms for the disagreement between black optimism and afro-pessimism. Both approaches look for alternatives to building a militant black consciousness, which they find in Fanon's becoming-wretched. The fact of black social death establishes their two divergent paths: infinity and nothingness. Black vitalism affirms the irrepressible spirit of blackness as a fugitive force that evades capture. The homicidal fatality of blackness theorizes the structural positionality of blackness as the destructive outside to civil society. In spite of their differences, both accounts draw on a psychoanalytic account of the libido as an uncontrollable exterior. Yet I do not find either to fully resolve the fact of blackness into the stance of pessimism. I propose *uchromia* as a radical amendment to both by way of Laruelle's insufficiency.

Returning to Mbembe, he continues his remarks by saying:

We recognise the moment of pessimism when the layers of the past and the world of the present fall into the void; that is, a place that is not a place. We recognise the moment of pessimism when we trivialise human experience or provoke misplaced empathy

or contempt, when, unable to release language, we succumb to the elemental materiality of the there is.

We enter this “dark night of language” when its symbolising powers are suddenly crippled and, instead of revealing what is hidden within the self-evident and what lies beneath the surface, behind the mask, language circles in on itself and hides what it should be showing.

Of course, Mbembe ends on an optimistic note. Yet as Thacker suggests, “the true optimists are the most severe pessimists,” as they are “optimisms that have run out options” (“Cosmic Pessimism,” 70). Our final options are many: consciousness-raising, appealing to the radical archive, affirming a subterranean force, relishing in the power of destruction, deconstructing caricatures, the jouissance when language fails, finding the place where heaven meets hell. But beyond their failures, the choice need not be between infinity or nothingness. Utopia may come from the ultimate pessimistic move of complete withdrawal.

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